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Greens can't beat Reform

Socialists need a plan

With the surge in support for Reform UK, the breakthrough by the Greens, and the collapse of the two-party system, the country stands at a crossroads. Of course, socialists can only rejoice at Starmer's Labour getting trounced in the elections. But the prospect of a Farage-led government is terrifying for millions, especially migrants, minorities, trans people and many others. A Reform-led government would be bad news for workers, too. Farage would have immense authority to tighten the screws on the working class for the benefit of the City of London.

The question is, how to stop Reform? Starmer is on the ropes. MPs are preparing to dump him to avoid a total wipe-out at the next general election. The pressure is on socialists, and indeed, anyone who wants to stop Farage, to back the Greens. Even before the election, most leftists had already embraced them. Owen Jones and Novara Media went gaga for Polanski. And in the elections, the SWP's line amounted to vote for anybody (even Labour?) against Reform. Even the RCP, with its "above the fray" air, could neither confirm nor deny if they have joined the Green bandwagon.

The pressure has intensified after the election, with Reform on the rise across Britain. For many, the Greens might not be their cup of tea, but they are seen as the only option to beat Farage.

The Greens are where they are today because of the debacle of Your Party. Zack Polanski cleverly pulled the Greens to the left, adopting an anti-Zionist, tax-the-rich stance, and moved into the space that should have been occupied by Your Party. The left's defeat at the hands of Corbyn is why the Greens look like the only vehicle to defeat Farage. But Polanski's radical posture is only this—a posture—which makes it all the more important for socialists to fight against illusions in the Greens. It's not just that the Greens can't stop the right; they are part of the problem.

The problem with the Greens

The Green Party is a hodge-podge of different elements—from veteran eco-warriors to hipsters to liberal idealists. Its policies are all over the map, ranging from an obsession with reducing cars to promises to "make hope normal". This is no match for Reform UK, which has succeeded in posturing as anti-establishment by using a consistent message—a vile chauvinist message for sure—of opposition to liberal immigration policies and "wokeness".

More so, the Greens' surge is based on an unstable coalition, which cannot beat the far right's appeal. As a left-liberal party, the Greens are growing mainly in middle-class areas and ethnically diverse urban ones. The party's social liberalism attracts support from women, LGBTQ+ and trans people. At the same time, Polanski has expanded their appeal to Muslims by adopting a pro-Palestinian stance. But it is not possible to maintain those various groups united only based on vague "hope" and feel-good politics. Without a clear working-class programme directed against the City of London, the same fractures we see everywhere between Muslims and LGBTQ+ militants, between the working class and liberal graduates, between white and non-white are bound to explode.

Crucially, the Greens have absolutely no chance of undercutting Reform's support in working-class areas. Polanski's party is the very embodiment of everything that working-class people despise about the liberal status quo: the smug condescension of the London elites who ran the country while these areas were gutted and their communities written off as backward and racist, while factories were shut and jobs slashed in the name of the environment. Even Green cheerleader Owen Jones had to admit that the most realistic goal for the Greens had to be confined to "urban Britain"—that is, a few Green islands in a turquoise sea.

The Greens' opposition to the Zionist genocide of the Palestinians did cross a line for the British establishment. And so, when the Green Party moved from the fringe to a contender for influence in Parliament, Polanski was subjected to a vicious witch hunt. The capitalist press hounded him with the same ferocity we saw against

Spartacist League, British section of the International Communist League (Fourth Internationalist)
workershammer • info@workershammer.co.uk • 07301 003174 • PO Box 42886 London N19 5WY
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Jeremy Corbyn a decade ago. But the Greens are not in the business of confronting the establishment, which is why some in the party leadership are already pulling to the right. To assure the authorities of their respectability, Green Party deputy leader Rachel Millward has publicly promised to root out the "anti-Semitism" problem. Any backpedalling in favour of Zionism will lose them the support of Muslims and other pro-Palestinian voters. But as the Greens become relevant, and as they want to become a respectable party, they will bend to the right and go after the left wing.

The last thing the left needs right now is to waste energy building the Greens. Instead, left groups should pool our resources and collaborate in building a socialist, working-class bridgehead that clearly demarcates itself from the Greens. We are not starting from scratch. Within the Grassroots Left of Your Party, we agreed on key elements of a socialist programme, based on opposition to Zionism and imperialism, and a pro-working-class orientation. We should now regroup our forces around these demands and build a socialist opposition to the Greens. Putting the socialist movement back on its feet and, crucially, reconnecting with the working class, is the first step towards defeating Reform.

Thankfully, not everyone on the left is caving to the pressure. A minority around the Grassroots Left correctly opposed the Greens, on the grounds that they are not socialist, have no connection to the working class and will impose budget cuts in the councils they take control of. This is all true, indeed the Greens were built as a fundamentally anti-socialist party. But these arguments are not sufficient to turn the tide of illusions in the Greens. Many people know that the Greens are not the solution to all their problems. Most people don't see the Greens' lack of connection to the working class as a problem; for that matter, today the socialist movement itself has little connection to the working class. To confront the dominant illusions head-on, we must show why the Greens, by their nature, cannot stop the rise of the right.

What will it take to stop Reform?

To cut the ground from under Reform, we need to win over its working-class support. The right's appeal is strongest in Labour heartlands—from former coal-mining and steel-producing regions to ex-manufacturing areas. In England, they gained over 1400 council seats, and in the Scottish and Welsh parliaments, they came from nowhere to second place behind the winners, the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru. Any appeal to workers in these areas must put the blame for their social and economic ruin where it belongs: with the City of London and global finance capital. A Reform government will not only increase the poisonous divisions within the working class by racist scapegoating of migrants, but will serve the interests of the City, which will worsen the conditions of life for working-class people.

As things now stand, the Greens' only hope to become a factor is as a potential coalition partner with broader forces, particularly post-Starmer Labour. Socialists must vehemently oppose any such anti-Farage popular front. A coalition of the Greens with Labour MPs who have supported Starmer through the genocide and the cost-of-living crisis would prolong the reign of the liberal status quo. It would fuel the growth of Farage's base and only postpone the day when he forms a government. Liberal coalitions will not advance the interests of the oppressed or the fight against austerity.

The same is true in Scotland, where the SNP was re-elected despite widespread public discontent over the decline of public services during their watch. This speaks to the strength of feeling, especially among the working class, for independence from London. But the SNP cannot advance the national struggle one iota, nor can they mend the broken public services. Neither can Plaid Cymru address the economic deprivation or the national aspirations of the Welsh people. By defending the same old liberal politics, these parties are guaranteed to fuel Reform.

There is no other option: the only way to seriously challenge Reform is to build a new, socialist alternative armed with a perspective for working-class power which can prepare a confrontation with the City of London. It starts with picking up the pieces from Your Party, regrouping those socialists who do not want to become mere Polanski cheerleaders, and adopting a clear programme of struggle against the British ruling class. Crucially, it means understanding that socialists can build an alternative only if they counterpose themselves not just to Reform and Labour, but to the Greens as well. Of course, this is neither quick nor "sexy". But there isn't another way.

Instead of socialists dissipating their energies promoting the Greens, such a regroupment should focus on reconnecting with the working class. It should seek to regroup militants in trade unions and workplaces in order to coordinate campaigns and debate strategy and tactics. It would also force socialists to concretise our overall aims, deal with the reality of workers today and climb down from the clouds of abstractions. Crucially, this could be a way to organise the struggle against union bureaucrats, who have turned the trade unions into empty shells propping up Labour.

Even a small group of socialists, if well organised and clear-sighted, could have a big impact in the struggle to rebuild the trade-union movement. This is what could actually start to undermine Reform's appeal among workers. And for sure, it would be a more constructive use of our collective energy than promoting the Greens. ■